



Fat Healthy,
Live Healthy

The Secrets to a Balanced Diet

Eat Healthy, Live Healthy: The Secrets to a Balanced Diet

One of the ways to pursue healthy living is to fuel yourself with the recommended daily requirements of vitamins and minerals as well as the ideal amount of calories that largely depends on the activities you mostly engage in each day. Eating a balanced diet everyday coupled with exercise is the best way to stay healthy.

Scientists are still trying to look into the correlation between diet and certain types of cancers. About a century ago, cancer (colon, breast, and lung cancer) was not as rampant as how it is today, being the second leading cause of death especially in highly-urbanized countries where a typical diet comprises mainly of fast foods and processed foods that are poor sources of fiber and essential nutrients.

Likewise, a diet high in fats can lead to various ailments that usually surface once you are in the advancing age but high-risk people may acquire these diseases at a younger age than others in the same age bracket. Among the causes of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases are foods high in fat, cholesterol, and sodium content. Fat in itself, though, is not entirely harmful, as you will learn in this article.

The Food Pyramid

We are taught since grade school that a balanced diet consists of those found in the food pyramid. The pyramid itself outlines the ideal amounts of certain foods belonging to each group and serves as a foundation in order for us to attain optimum health.

Today's food pyramid, though, consists of a wider range of options than the traditional carbohydrates, dairy, meat, fruits and vegetables. It encompasses whole grains, seeds and nuts, legumes, meat, fish, including plant oils like virgin coconut oil or olive oil. If you are to consider religious, ethnic, cultural and personal preference then you'll find more options to incorporate in planning for healthy meals and snacks.

Surprisingly, there is no one ideal food pyramid given the above consideration. For example, the food groups in a vegetarian diet's pyramid are obviously different from that of an ordinary food pyramid.

More so, other cultures have their own pyramids such as the Asian Diet Pyramid, the Latin American Diet Pyramid, Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, and so on. The food pyramids from these cultures also largely depend on what foods are available in their respective regions.

The food pyramid is shaped like it is for a purpose. Those at the base of the pyramid is the food group that you need to eat the most and gradually narrowing up to the top are the foods that you should eat in smaller amounts. As mentioned, our body needs certain levels of vitamins, minerals, and calories to function well and reach longevity.

Basic principles of food pyramids. Despite the differences of foods in food pyramids, it helps to know the basic principle of food pyramids (as a guide for your own food pyramid) that are largely similar and give emphasis on the following:

- Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains should largely consist of your meals
- Saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol intake must be reduced
- Sweets should be taken in moderation
- Drink alcoholic beverages in moderate amounts, if you cannot help it

- Limit the number of calories you consume each day by controlling serving portions of some foods
- Exercise should be part of your daily routine.

Food pyramids place foods in categories such as meat, dairy, whole grains, and beans to guide you in choosing the foods you prefer because no single food group can provide you all the nutrients your body needs for the day. This places high importance on eating a variety from each food group to promote good health.

Too much of something is harmful. Consciously or sub-consciously, we know that some substances found in foods when taken excessively (that is, other than the body requires everyday) will have an impact on our well-being. Typically, two things can happen: the excesses are excreted out of the body or they get stored indefinitely as the body's coping mechanism. This is how the food pyramid can help you make your food selection for a balanced-diet.

Make room for the essential nutrients

Carbohydrates. Our body's main source of energy are carbohydrates, which is why it is important to consume more of carbohydrates-rich foods than any other type of food in the food pyramid. Long ago, people get carbohydrates mostly from whole grains, corn, and fruits like banana, etc. Today, carbohydrates are divided into two categories: the refined and unrefined.

Technological advancements have paved the way for the manufacture of refined carbohydrates using machinery to remove the high-fiber bits (as in bran and germ) from the whole grains. White rice, sugary cereals, white bread, pasta, and noodles belong to this category. You can also look into the label of these foods to find out whether "refined" constitutes some of the ingredients.

Classified as unrefined carbohydrates are whole grains whose bran and germ are preserved, making them good sources of fiber. Brown rice, wholegrain wheat bread, oatmeal, and whole-wheat pasta are examples of unrefined carbohydrates.

Strictly speaking, dieticians and nutritionists prefer the unrefined versions since fiber is instrumental in keeping our bowel movement steady. At the same time, whole grains make you feel fuller more quickly and longer – which makes it ideal for people who are trying to lose weight.

Moreover, refined carbohydrates are believed to cause sluggish bowel movement that results in constipation. The recommended daily intake of fiber for women is 21-30 grams and 30-38 grams for men. However, studies show that a typical American consumes only between 5-14 grams of fiber per day.

Nutritionists recommend that carbohydrates taken from whole wheat bread, cereals, and potato groups should make up the bulk of your diet, or about 47 to 50 percent. To make matters simple, make sure that a serving or two from this food group should be included in your meals, along with fiber-rich foods.

Fruits and Vegetables.

Plant-based foods are not only brimming with fiber but are also rich in vitamins and minerals essential for the body organs to do their functions the way they should. In particular, the high fiber-content of fruits and vegetables aids in digestion, at the same time, lowers your risk of developing Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Fruits and vegetables, additionally, have high concentrations of antioxidants that may help thwart the formation of some cancers as well as neutralize toxins in the body.

Fiber. Dietary fiber has two types: insoluble and soluble fiber. Insoluble fiber is the type of fiber that hastens the movement of material along your digestive tract and increases the bulk of your stool as well – which is beneficial for those having irregular bowel movement and constipation. Fruits and vegetables in general are excellent sources of insoluble fiber, as well as the other sources mentioned earlier.

Soluble fiber dissolves in water and forms gel-like materials in the intestines. This type of fiber helps lower cholesterol and glucose levels in the blood, and aids in passing stools regularly. Generous amounts of fiber can be found in oats, peas, beans, citrus fruits, apples, psyllium, and barley.

Scientific studies suggest that consuming at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day can help lower your risk of acquiring illnesses that are the leading causes of death nowadays like hypertension, heart disease, and some cancers. Fresh fruits and vegetables are still preferred although it would not hurt also to try them in tinned, frozen, or juiced versions.

What is one portion?

One portion is equivalent to about 80g of fruits or vegetables. If five seems hard to achieve, here's a recommendation on how you can get to this goal everyday. At breakfast, you could include a handful of dried fruit (apricots and raisins) to your cereal, eat a medium-sized fruit and drink a glass of fruit juice.

At lunch, have a bowl of vegetable or fruit salad, a banana sandwich, and a cup of vegetables. Then for your evening meal, you could add vegetables or pulses to your stir-fry or casserole and serve at least two types of vegetables with chicken, fish, or meat.

When craving for a snack, remind yourself to avoid chocolate and biscuits and reach for an apple, pear, or banana instead.

Get the most from fruits and veggies

To get the most from fruits and vegetables, it is best to eat them as soon as you can rather than storing them for an extended period or opt for frozen instead. Vegetables are most beneficial when they are eaten half-cooked as this preserves their nutrients. Overcooking destroys the essential vitamins and minerals.

In addition, some vitamins are water-soluble so it is best to cook vegetables or fruits with little water. If the vegetables were steamed, you could use the water from the steam to recapture the vitamins that were lost to water.

Fat-soluble and water-soluble

Lastly, it's best to understand what vitamins are water and fat-soluble to enhance their absorption. Most vitamins can't be made by your body and no one fruit or vegetable can provide you with all the vitamins you need. That's why the key to healthy living is to consume a wide variety of fruit and vegetables to get all the nutrients your body requires everyday, except for vitamin D which is created under your skin when exposed to sunlight.

The fat-soluble vitamins are – A, D, E and K, which are distributed throughout the body through fat. This emphasizes that fats have their benefits if taken in small amounts. Because the body does not entirely immediately use these vitamins, it stores them in liver cells and fatty tissues for a limited period of time until such need comes.

The water-soluble vitamins are C and the B vitamins (B₆, B₁₂, biotin, folic acid, niacin, pantothenic acid, riboflavin, and thiamin), of which absorption and transport are hastened by water. Regular daily intake of those vitamins is vital because the body is not capable of storing them.

Minerals we need

Among the essential nutrients that can be derived from fruits and vegetables are minerals. Minerals are inorganic substances that can be found abundantly on the

earth's surface particularly on rocks and soil, and are needed by our system in order for it to carry out its functions.

Trees and plants absorb minerals from the soil while absorption into animal bodies is made possible through consumption of fruits and vegetables. Similar to vitamins, the body's daily mineral requirements also differ variably depending on how they are utilized by our system. Some minerals are needed in larger quantities while others in minute amounts (called trace minerals).

The major minerals are specifically important for the body to be able to build strong bones and teeth, systematize fluids both within and outside of cells, participate in energy production, as well as aid in some complex functions of major organs. The major minerals include calcium, chloride, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, sodium.

Trace minerals, meanwhile, have specific biological functions and are essential in the absorption and utilization of many nutrients as well as other biological activities vital to life. The most essential trace minerals are iron, zinc, chloride, iodine, fluoride, chromium, selenium, manganese, and molybdenum.

It's important to know the key roles of minerals to understand how they assist the body's biological functions. Studies have likewise noted that minerals have a huge role to play in the immune system and how the body's immunity and capability, to ward off invaders, reach their peak efficiency.

Several studies have lauded the role of minerals in increasing the body's defenses. Copper and Iron specifically have participatory actions in strengthening the immune system and increasing "antibodies" against infection caused by bacteria, viruses, and protozoans.

Minerals, like vitamins, could also reach toxicity once the body has too much of them so a visit to your doctor for an advice on supplements may be helpful. After

all, eating a balanced diet would suffice to help you attain your daily requirements of vitamins and minerals.

To achieve healthy living, it helps to realize the "caveman" lifestyle, which practically translates to living harmoniously with nature. Inorganic substances, chemicals, and toxins all upset the body's system and may emerge as fatigue, stress, the feeling of bloating, and many others. Eat right, sleep right, and don't forget to include a regular physical activity and you'll be in top shape soon.